

PROPHETS, PHILOSOPHERS AND SCHOLARS: THE IDENTITY OF COMMUNICATION AND THE COMMUNICATION OF IDENTITY

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Abstract

For generations, those outside of the Euro-American cultural-geographical sphere see the idea of communication as a modern phenomenon. Indeed, our study and teaching of communication, mass communication, media studies are bracketed within the confines of modernity, beginning with the European Enlightenment. To think and study communication within a 'traditional' and spiritualist trajectory is deemed invalid and inconceivable. While the critique of Eurocentricism in the social sciences is well-known, critiques on the idea of communication, especially from academicians and scholars in Malaysia, have been glaringly absent. The premise of this paper assumes that the idea and a peculiar ethnocentric intellectual history of communication had influenced the development of thought and disenfranchised our identity as knowing subjects, so much so that the concepts and categories developed are seen to originate only from mainstream sociological (and communication) theory. As the Other, we are seen as the ignorant subject, and along the way, reproduce and perpetuate that ignorance by denying the legitimacy of our intellectual history. We have been conditioned to think that spiritual and belief systems, philosophy, art, literature, culture and history lie outside the possibility of theorizing communication and ourselves. It is therefore urgent to conceptualize non-modernist and non-Euro-American knowledge systems as it informs us on the idea and evolution of communication to compliment mainstream histories.

Abstrak

Sejak dari generasi ke generasi, bagi yang berada di luar sfera georafibudaya Eropah-Amerika melihat idea komunikasi sebagai fenomena moden. Malahan kajian dan pengajian bidang komunikasi, komunikasi massa, pengajian media dilingkungan sebagai kemodenan dan bermula dengan kesedaran Eropah (Europe enlightenment). Memikir dan mengkaji komunikasi di atas landasan tradisional dan spiritual dianggap sebagai tidak sah dan tidak diterima. Sementara kritikan berasaskan pandangan Barat dalam sains sosial diketahui umum, kritikan terhadap idea komunikasi terutama dari para akademik dan sarjana Malaysia

jasar tiada. Asas kepada kertas kerja ini mengandaikan bahawa idea komunikasi dan sejarah komunikasi yang bersifat keintelektualan etnosentrik telah mempengaruhi perkembangan pemikiran dan perlucutan identiti subjek yang berpengetahuan seolah-olah konsep dan kategori yang berkembang terhasi hanya melalui teori perdana komunikasi dan sosiologi. Sebagai orang luar, kita di lihat sebagai subjek yang jahil dan di sepanjang perkembangan ilmu tersebut, menghasilkan semula dan mengingat kejahilan tersebut dengan menafikan legitimasi sejarah keintelektualan sendiri. Kita dilazimkan untuk memikirkan bahawa sistem kepercayaan dan spiritual, falsafah, seni, sastera budaya dan sejarah terletak di luar kemungkinan "theorizing" semula komunikasi dan diri sendiri. Oleh itu, adalah penting dan segera untuk mengkonsepsikan sistem pengetahuan bukan moden dan bukan Eropah-Amerika (Barat) kerana ia memaklumkan bahawa idea dan evolusi komunikasi saling membantu sejarah perdana.

Keywords: Communication studies, eurocentricism identity, McLuhanism occidentalism

Introduction

Allow me to explain the genesis and trajectory of this paper. The study of communication and that of the idea of communication itself is problematic – something which began to disturb me more than a decade ago. It was during the search on where to study for my doctorate. The location, to my mind, was important – on whether I would pursue my thesis in a communication studies environment, being 'institutionalized' in the field, or discipline if you like in some communication school, and be more or less accustomed and comfortable with methodologies, and epistemologies and with the territory and with some very territorial people – whom I would conveniently label as nationalists; or situating myself within the wider domain of the human and social sciences, not institutionalized in communication, but external to it and looking at communication from the outside, another perspective, or another realm. I then began to see the larger histories – the epistemological and political constitutents and their intersections within social structures. I then arrived at two distinct observations in our constructed imagination of the study of communication: one, we cannot assume that communication is exclusive to itself; and two, that there is a lack of fit between the communication as received knowledge and our existence.

This led me to embark on my doctoral studies in 1996 and subsequently organized a Colloquium in 2003 titled 'Communication Study and the Human Sciences: A Transdisciplinary Colloquium.' The outcome of that Colloquium is being published as a book to be titled *Blinded by the Lights: Three Decades of Communication Study in Malaysia*.¹ On the observations made, much of which is still being

written to introduce the book, I have raised the questions of fluidity, flux, relevance and irrelevance. On the questions of relevance and irrelevance, I make reference to 'White Studies,' dubbed by Cherokee scholar Ward Churchill on the amalgam of Western theory and method – a less polite reference to what otherwise may be referred to as a Euro-American-centric knowledge system.

In my introduction being written for the book, I describe the field as fluid and is constantly in a state of flux; or even to put it in context irrelevantly fluid and decontextually irrelevant to us. It was constructed, and imposed externally so much so that we can hardly be conscious of its ideological dominance. What passes as knowledge of communication/media studies/mass communication/cultural studies as conceived in universities/communication departments and the academic community in Malaysia may be described by the all inclusive label as 'White Studies.' To put it bluntly, the setting up of such schools and programs in Malaysian universities can be catalogued as imposing 'White Communication Studies.' Communication that we know now originated with and reflected the worldview of largely the European knowledge system and by extension that of the American empire which assume that the system, born within specific historical, cultural and political framework, was universal. As Huntington of the clash of civilization fame once described it in a title of a Foreign Affairs article "The West is Unique, but not Universal." And it is also true of communication study in our thought and what is taught by us.

The crux of communication study problem is not merely in the omission or the distortion of matters of facts of our society and being; but of the dominance of a Eurocentric (also read American) worldview for the continued maintenance and expansion, even survival of a certain way of the production and reproduction of knowledge. It is the perpetuation of its own intellectual paradigm. And we succumb, in our thinking, areas of research and intellectual foci to an approved way of seeing, understanding and being – at the expanse of excluding ourselves – making our existence irrelevant – marginalizing and alienating our being. Thus far, there is no shadow, even a faint one (and how can there *be* any) of a viable conceptual structure, other than the object that cast the larger shadow.

The communication paradigm embedded in our thought is captive of the framework of 'White Communication Studies' that came to be expanded across the globe through colonialism and its inherent institutions of education and research set up to deal with those colonized and hegemonized. While Europeans and Americans claim reasons for assuming superiority of their own knowledge system, we do not even understand that what has happened is that we have swallowed hook, line and sinker, not only the content (just take a cursory look at the papers that we have written, journal

articles and books published, and syllabi taught) but the conceptual framework, theorizing and the periodization of our society and the world. Tragically, we credit it with universality. And why do we remain faithful to the teaching, interpretation and implementation of communication and media studies in our countries or those outside the Western world? What explanation do we have for simply assuming that only White Communication Studies could be the basis for teaching our students and making them understand (or misunderstand) phenomena and deploy skills for building the nation and society. Is the communication study implanted in our universities the only one and the one and only? Don't we want to think of complementing the existing one? Don't we want to think that there are many, or no such thing (as communication studies)? Or don't we want to think that there must be an objectivated one – thus demystifying the very epistemological, historical and political constituents that have come to gain currency in the world?

It is necessary for us to ask these questions, and necessary to find answers. Why teach the field and other social science disciplines as such? Are we telling our generation that we have to restrict our intellectual tradition to conform to a particular worldview? Whether we teach sociology, history, geography, literature, anthropology or science, or philosophy, we rarely (if we do) teach anything of our own. We teach only borrowed material, dished up by another culture, and call it our own. All of us went to university, studied in some communication or social science department, trained to discourse on the main concepts, and never perhaps (and most probably is) at any time thought that the assumptions of the knowledge system ought to be thoroughly examined, let alone rejected.

The entire structure of Malaysian academia, and that of Southeast Asia today is nothing but a reflection of a Eurocentric social science. The curricula across the world is very much the same. And so what do we do? I am much tempted to relate some of options articulated by one participant at a seminar on the social science curricula held in Penang in late 2004.² Our problem is in not being conscious of object and subject of study. There are basically three options for colonized peoples in terms of subjecthood to a colonial discourse. The first is that we can remain 'good subjects' to the colonial and the imperial system and not question any of its precepts or how it is distributed. A good subject means that we play by all the rules, treat them with respect and reverence, do what we are supposed to do, work within the hierarchy, and follow all the procedures, protocol and parameters of the system. This observably the norm among us, going by the nature of our topics and methodologies employed, journals and books locally published, and

other literature and discourses in the social and human sciences, and communication studies.

The second choice is that we can become 'bad subjects' of the colonial system by accepting most of its precepts but questioning its distribution. This means that we merely engage ourselves in quibbling over its details, arguing and perhaps even trying to wrestle some control of the state away from the colonialists. Bad subjects cannot really change much, apart from complaining and arguing. Bad subjects do not get at the root of the problem, they do not alter the terms of discourse, but more or less perpetuate and perhaps reproduce the same discourse and thought, thinking that it is their very own. And we see much of this in attempts by the Malaysian intellectual community beginning in the 1980's in the indeginization and Islamization approaches on the social and human sciences, and communication.

The third choice reasons on becoming a non-subject – to abandon the discourse completely, to 'vacate the space.' This implies liberating ourselves from Western colonialism, imperialism; and the globalization of communication studies, and the larger social sciences or area studies such as Southeast Asian Studies – the entity of which is a result of seeing the region as epistemological and political space to be conquered. The third choice means escaping from that particular mode of intellectual production and operating as 'non-subjects' by thinking and acting in ways beyond the reach of the parochial set of assumptions embedded in the communication model that has come to dominate us. In other words, give up. No, I have not given up – so do not jump at my throat. Dialogue and participation must continue. In the second part of the paper, I shall discuss on a fourth option.

To conclude on the background of this paper, I have to state that for three decades (and more) we have succumbed to the system. A vibrant intellectual community does not mean reproducing in our way of thinking what we have hitherto learnt from our professors embedded in their own knowledge systems. A vibrant intellectual community is questioning and subverting the very scholarship itself. As Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2004) articulates it so powerfully in her classic *Decolonizing Methodologies* – theories, research and paradigms are charged with emotion, are biased and ideological. History informs our consciousness and our state of mind within the colonial order and imperialistic arrangements. And what she implies is decolonizing our minds by dismantling habits of knowledge seeking and epistemes.

What has happened to the study of communication manifests the deep complicity of academic forms of knowledge with institutions of power. Edward Said in his *Orientalism* (1978) makes it

clear on the mode of operation and the detailed texture of cultural domination of an academic discipline in that, as he argues, constitutes nothing less than a science of imperialism. His analyses in *Orientalism* force us to the recognition that all knowledge may be contaminated, implicated even in its very formal or 'objective' structures. To the extent that all knowledge is produced within institutions of various sorts, there is always a determined relation to the state and to its political practices.

I have to acknowledge that this paper is inspired and quite loosely framed by an essay published in October 2001 titled 'A History of an Identity, an Identity of a History: The Idea and Practice of "Malayness" in Malaysia Reconsidered,' by social anthropologist Shamsul Amri Baharuddin.³ My purpose is to share and relate the problems of the construction of Malay identity to that of the construction of the idea of communication studied and accepted by us. I have at great risk taken the liberty to examine the persona of the field that we are engaged in to that of the Malay defined. Another paper which I find useful for the purpose of our discussion is quite recent in origin. The discussion in Shaharuddin Maaruf's 'Melayu Aib dan Melayu Ghaib: Satu Kritikan Terhadap Pendekatan-Pendekatan Mentakrif Melayu dan Kemelayuan' (*The Ugly and the Invisible Malay: A Critique of Approaches in Defining Malay and Malay-ness*)⁴ presented at the Academy of Malay Studies, University of Malaya on September 22 (2005). In introducing the subject of discussion, he states that the definition of the Malay is a 'blank cheque because there is no ethnic core.' I thought what I heard was analogous to communication as an inquiry – constructed and without a (an epistemological) core. In an essay I wrote in 2004,⁵ I discussed about how history forms our consciousness – and how the formation of the nation-state produces and provides a particular form of knowledge that informs us on our notions of patriotism, nationalism and identity. I thought that these are problematic and has to be recognized as such. All human knowledge is historical. The social sciences cannot be studied in the present tense. Sociology, anthropology, and certainly communication are historical sciences. One cannot understand sociology without understanding the forces of history and society. The forces of history have constructed both of communication as an intellectual inquiry and the conceptualization of the Malay and that of Malayness. I find that both have an identity problem. Both, arguably, have a problem in the absence of a core. To reiterate, for communication, an epistemological core; for the Malays, an ethnic core. Perhaps it would be far fetched to look at precise parallels, but that the debate on Malayness has much to say on our notion of Malayness. In a real sense, colonialism has played a McLuhanian role in constructing knowledge and modes of knowing. Our idea of the Malay is an extension of the colonial

worldview. Similarly, our idea of communication is also an extension, this time, of the Euro-American worldview. The social is an outcome of the historical. For the purpose of contextualizing this paper, it would be instructive to provide a brief sketch of Shamsul's argument. In Shamsul's paper, we gather that the formation of 'Malay-Malayness' as a social identity is learned or constructed, and created, shaped, and determined by history and historiography. He criticized historians for uncritically adopting and conforming to the forces of colonial historiography. As such, things are popularly taken for granted. His attempt at examining the theme of 'identity formation in Malaysia,' particularly amongst the Malays, in a concrete, if not material way, commenced with a systematic analysis of the concept of *kampung* (village), a term that has long been taken for granted by Malaysianists who have too easily treated *kampung* as synonymous with 'Malay' and 'Malayness.' Using the categories 'authority-defined' and 'authority-defining' collectives in Malaysia, Shamsul raises popular and modern Malay sociopolitical concepts, categories and classifications on a macro level.

Measured against the epistemological concerns on the construction of (colonial) knowledge and our modes of knowing about ourselves, there is an 'absent discourse' of a similar nature on communication as an intellectual inquiry in Malaysia. Over the last three decades from the time the formal study of communication began in the country, studies in communication and media have not explored such concepts as *Bangsa* ('nation'), *negara* (state), *ketuanan Melayu* (Malay dominance), *gerakan kebangsaan* (nationalist movement or nationalism), *jatidiri bangsa* (national identity) and *bangsa idaman* (nation-of-intent). These concepts are much relevant in studies on journalism and other mass media, as well as practice of communication in its institutional and cultural domains, and issues of representation. Available writings have been identity sanitized. There is an absence of studies or an identifiable body of work on Malay ideas on communication (and cognizant of the constructed Malayness) or a specific corpus on the Malay media, Malay journalism, Malay journalists, or Malay newspapers, or Malay semiotics coming from the communication scholars' fraternity; or for that matter extracting features peculiar to various societies in Malaysia within the matrix of politics and cultural communities. And if there are (see for example Hairudin Harun, 2001 and 2004) they originate from outside the domain. Applicable to the discussion about ideas on communication, my article on 'Rewriting History' (2004) discusses on what history does to us in its collusion with imperialism and colonialism and how it affects our collective consciousness. The knowledge accumulated by us are constructed in the past, leading to the effect of framing our collective consciousness,

which in turn, manifests our knowledge of history. Like other former colonized societies, we are a society of narratives lost.

The Identity of Communication: The McLuhanite Personality of Imperialism

My preoccupation in searching for the core, and reconstituting communication as a field of study locates it within the domain of knowledge producing systems. We know that communication grew from contributions of other areas or disciplines from the social and human sciences. It came to be known as a 'hybrid discipline' – a 'hodgepodge' of areas or a heap of 'leftovers, as Wilbur Schramm describes it in his memoir (1997). And it came to us (in Malaysia) from those like Ralph Kleisch, John Lent and Eliot Parker who introduced literature with titles as *Mass Media and National Development*; *The Passing of Traditional Society*; and *Man, Media and Messages*. I asked myself – what was so 'communication' about those literature? Where could one locate the 'media' and 'us'? What was it (and exposure to McLuhan can make it worse). What kinds of knowledge, concepts, and categories do those books inform us? How can we identify a corpus of knowledge as communication? How did it connect to our being and our community? What relevance was there in learning about notions of development and the use of media?, Newspapers in New York? or Walter Lippmann and his *Public Opinion*? Why bother about Schramm, Berelson, Lazarsfeld, Park, Lent, Kincaid, Cooley, Rogers, Schiller, Horkheimer, Halloran, or Habermas? Or even about Marx, Durkheim and Weber? My initial response to those questions led me to embark on my doctoral study – not confining myself to a communication school, in a history and philosophy of science department. My capital was ferment. Why must communication be in ferment? In the course of study, I noticed a number of characteristics in that there were (and still are) areas of fragmentation, and points of convergence. In between, the ferment continues. And this merits opportunities for concepts and categories in the light of a multitude of paradigms and perspectives. I sense a defective mode of knowing through what we identify as (mass) communication.

One aspect of communication among us is associated with development and progress. Much work in the early years of communication study and also presently focuses on the issues of development, freedom, democracy and technology much impinging on the nexus of growth and dissemination. Such studies, although not 'Malay' specific, has been constructed and elaborated in an Orientalist mould by colonial administrators-scholars, and by extension the era of developmentalism dominated by the American

empire. Communication scholars use this knowledge without problematizing many of the key terms. These very same concepts, categories and classifications, argues Shamsul (2001) on 'Malayness'

subsequently instituted a host of ideas which politicians, bureaucrats and administrators have been all too happy to use and perpetuate in the form of governmental and official policies up to the present day...

The perpetuation of the instrumentality of communication to the development and progress of the nation has been constructed by what is termed as cultural invasion in the form of a conquest of the native 'epistemological space' (Shamsul, 2001). In simple terms, this means that our thought system has been interfered, and dismantled, and by doing so, we are disempowered to define our world – to define our thought, values, and the significance of our material and other non-material artifacts. Hence, our notion of the social, and that of communication has been skewed toward an instrumentalist mentality, or rather a simplistic understanding of relations between two parties. Studies on effects, and diffusion, press freedom and the use of Information Communication Technologies become fashionable. We study ourselves as consumers of products, services and information and culture; as political actors in a democratic system; as citizens of a nation state. Rarely, if any do we study ourselves as human beings, as believers, as communities of people living our daily lives. Rarely do we see ourselves as living souls with spirit, emotions, desires.

To put it simply, is communication a science with a well-defined subject matter, and an accumulated body of knowledge? Or can 'communication' be conceived as a topical field, as beneficiaries from the contributions of other disciplines? Some (such as Berger and Chaffee, 1987; and Golding and Murdock, 1980) have alluded and testified on communication as a discipline and as a science evidently based upon the existence of communication departments in universities, research traditions and journals. Berger and Chaffee especially note that if such existence can be taken as indicators of the 'disciplinicity,' communication then is acquiring the trappings of a discipline. Their definition of communication science points to the understanding of 'the production, processing, and effects and symbol and signal systems by developing testable theories, containing lawful generalizations, that explain phenomena associated with production, processing, and effects.' This definition embraces communication within the interpersonal, organizational, mass, political and instructional contexts. Much of our understanding

conforms to their definition. We see how these are thought, taught, and studied in our (mass) communication schools.

But perhaps the most powerful and most pervasive outcome in our comprehension of communication derives from the meaning of empire and imperial power, namely – dominance, persuasion, influence and the absence of direct control. Although not entirely comprehensive on the subject of the genesis of the study of communication, Christopher Simpson's *Science of Coercion* (1994) represents a contextualized version of the emergence of communication as a field of study. Simpson significantly provides us with an example of how ideas intersecting with historical and political forces became a basis for the emergence of a new 'science' in the last century. Indeed, in the tradition of orientalism, it is difficult not to notice that what we have labeled as communication has been an extension of how American political culture has systematically produced the world in its own image. Simpson's study, is in part, a study of the sociology of knowledge. It is about the relationship between the production of 'knowledge' – that of what has come to be the corpus of communication study – and its epistemological, and particularly the existent political constituents. He zeroes in to the heart of modern psychological warfare and that it is:

A tool for managing empire, not for settling conflicts in any fundamental sense. It has operated largely as a means to ensure that indigenous democratic initiatives in the Third World and Europe did not go 'too far' from the standpoint of U.S. security agencies. Its primary utility has been its ability to suppress or distort unauthorized communication among subject peoples, including domestic U.S. dissenters who challenged the wisdom or morality of imperial policies...(Simpson, 8)

And this is where Schramm comes in. Simpson views Schramm as instrumental in establishing ideological and political preconceptions to communication research and education, both in the US and beyond. The influence of Schramm, through his writings and intellectual paradigm between 1945 and 1960 reveal a distinctly black and white, Manichaeian view of the world that pitted his Americanism against ideological rivals. And 40 years hence, that view still holds on America's views of the world – the us and them, democracy and its 'Islamist' and 'jihadist' Other, etc. Social science and national security has always been the best of buddies in America's external affairs and diplomacy. Indeed, the *zeitgeist* for the dominant paradigm was in place then. Together with Roger's diffusion studies and Lerner's development studies, communication study and research are well located within the template of social science. The 'authoritative' talking about communication and an

indirect role in determining how would enjoy access to the academic media necessary to be heard by others in the field left a legacy. Studies of national communication systems in linking it to theories of modernization and development have determined much of the thinking of Malaysian social science and communication scholars. Communication and development and media effects (now we have ICT effects) have always been popular areas of study and research. There is a peculiar way of thinking within and reproducing the zeitgeist of the dominant paradigm. Hence the study of communication is based on a knowing subject and an ignorant object. The dominant corpus of communication studied in Malaysia ignores the context of identity, for the identity. This mode of knowledge is so powerful that it has become almost ideological to the point of denying indigenous modes of knowing while perpetuating myths of our very own self and existence. Those in Malaysian communication schools have largely used paradigms such as Marxism, neo- Marxist variants of analysis such as Critical Theory and Political-Economy; Functionalism, Post-Modernism, or even Islam without seeing that the study of communication, both in epistemological and ontological terms, is problematic. What we understand of communication at various levels has been dominated, and factualized colonialism, imperialism and now globalization. What we fail to understand and initiate are the problems of universality of theories, categorizations and classifications. How can 'communication' be a particular form of knowledge for us and for us to understand ourselves? The second part of my paper is a response to the question.

The Communication of Identity: Image and Misrepresentation

In this part, I will discuss on the fourth option cited earlier. The representation and embodiment of our identity is certainly problematic. How we know ourselves and how we have selected that knowing determines the *facts* accumulated about us. The call for an alternative discourse and modes of thinking in creating a social science tradition in Southeast Asia have been responded by among other S.H. Alatas (1971), Shaharuddin Maaruf (1984, 1989) and Sinha (2001). In locating our discussion on the communication of identity, mention must be made of a few pioneers of alternative discourses in the region. Alatas (2001) cites five figures, namely Abdullah bin Abdul Kadir Munshi (1796-1854), Jose Rizal, Armijn Pane, Syed Hussein Alatas, and Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas. While they developed varying and at times opposing approaches, one major problems lies in history and historiography. Issues of rewriting history, the appropriateness of categorization and periodization, and problems of historical continuities and disjunctures were raised.

Sinha (1997) suggests a research agenda for those wishing to begin creating another tradition in the social science. First, to question the epistemological status of social science concepts, including those of 'indigenous,' 'native,' 'West,' and 'non-West;' second, to ground social theory in socio-cultural and political conditions of a locality, without necessarily rejecting Western social science; third, to theorize the global politics of academia with a view to uncovering its role in the perpetuation of a world division of labour in the social sciences, whereby non-western scholars are the collectors of empirical data and Western scholars the theorists; and fourth, to recognize multiple center and sources of social theory, that is, to regard all civilizations as potential sources of social science theorizing.

It is important to note that calls for revision and reconstruction in turn necessitates reconceptualization and the innovative use of methods of the social and human sciences. What is common is to counter Eurocentricism and Orientalism that informs the social and historical sciences. The historical is critical for there is an urgent need to recast existing sources in the light of non-European history. Regional and local histories, neglected in colonial historiography calls for a multidimensional multidisciplinary approach and treated in their own right. Malay and Malaysian journalism history, for example, has been chronicled as an extension of the European history and now as part of the American order of freedom and democracy, and for good measure, of responsibility, human rights, and now human dignity. History and our collective consciousness have pulled us to conform to these concepts and categories, and continues to shape our identity and how it is transmitted, understood and internalized by us as 'non-knowing' subject and objects'

What I mean by the communication of identity is not on the definition of the Malay or Malayness, or how and in what ways knowledge of and about Malay and Malayness was constructed and determined. I am here not concerned with the what of *jati diri* or *akal budi*. I am focusing on how the Malay is studied – the methodologies, styles and approaches adopted and deployed in the study of Malay identity and society for the very reason being that the methods of observation have a way of influencing and constructing the persona and image of the Malay and Malayness. If we ignore the value of our methodologies and approaches in studying the character of the Malay, our resultant findings and the transmission of that knowledge only misrepresents our object of study. We cannot continue to be ignorant subjects and hence create misrepresentations of our object of study. By the communication of identity, I mean the representation of that identity at various levels of policy, academic and popular discourses.

Much of the discourse by Malays themselves associate the Malay with negativity – much having to do with the lingering image

of the 'lazy native' embedded in social and cultural consciousness. We see that image constructed in historical, sociological and journalistic narratives. Before we sketch and discuss some examples from the narratives, I wish to belabour on what has been omitted in our study of communication, so much so that that omission too, has created a vacuum in our corpus of communication in context. For example, we teach journalism to our students. Much of the journalism is based on 'New York' newsgathering; and legitimizing the function of journalistic institutions and newspaper; press freedom and objectivity and the criteria of news as beginning with the modern era. Do we refer to the corpus on the hadith to understand the nature of the transmission of information, news, and ideas? We may have made reference to the Prophet Muhammad, and his companions, or the recorders and transmitters of the *sunnah*. Perhaps we have referred to the available corpus as ideas and historical ideas; but have we deliberated, developed and contextualized the corpus as a source of ideas for theories pertaining to communication and media? Have we explored the milieu and the Revelation and the societal context of Makkah and Madinah? Or that ideas on communication and the epistemology of media between the years of 600 AD through the 1800 in Muslim communities across the geographical stretch from what is now Morocco in the West to the Philippines, in the East? Or have we looked into the *hadith* merely as a religious and theological term and therefore left it under the purview of the ulama and religious scholars, or the *ustaz* of Islamic studies? If so, we are missing a whole existence of corpus leading to conceptualization, categorization and classification informing us on man and communication. (for example of works marginalized in the study of communication, see Izutsu, 1964; and Azami, 1978). Hence, how we conceive communication in our society is distorted and misrepresented due to the lack of creativity and originality. We can continuously learn from, reflect and theorize from Ibn Khaldun's theory of state formation, and all the apparatus and institutions that go with it, and make it relevant to the study of communication in context. Thus learning from sociology, as for example, in theory building, which addresses itself to the reconstruction of the pattern and rhythm of historical change, can be applied to, say Malay or Southeast Asian history, while the political-economy dimensions may be conceptualized in terms of modes of production. These illustrate, and the problems range from the inappropriateness of European views on religion to the distorting effects of survey research methods to the inapplicability of Western models. Since we do not consider the lack of continuity between the European tradition of knowledge and indigenous systems of ideas (Watanuki 1984: 283) as problematic, we move ourselves into a situation of a lack of fit at the conceptual and the practical levels. This raises the problem of

relevance and irrelevance in the social and human sciences (Alatas, 1996). Critical to our case is communication and media studies. What has happened, as mentioned many times earlier, is that the study of communication (like the rest of the social sciences) within our universities and intellectual tradition has been transplanted from a different culture into our historical and cultural setting arising in injustices and violence to our existence, and how we have come to think of ourselves (and of others).

Nevertheless we must not regard the entire social science tradition as irrelevant and should not reject knowledge on the grounds of its origins. The general idea was that social sciences are indigenous to their own settings and that the call for relevance is meant to contribute to the universalization of the social sciences. While prescriptive calls for relevance are necessarily vague, calls for relevant social science and communication seeks to address the problem of irrelevance and proceed to create, in the context of this paper, the creation of relevant communication studies. In the context of Malaya, and especially colonial Malaya and the Malay world, changes and transformations did take place, impinging upon media and communication. But these visible phenomena are made invisible by the assumptions of the dominant system of knowledge production (read colonial and imperial). The case of the misrepresentation in the literature on writing and journalism in Malay society, on cultural formations and cultural practices, on progress and development, and on technology and communication, language and material culture, social thought and intellectual history resulting from colonialist, imperial and political contexts of 'communicating' Malay identity is seen in at least two contemporary texts: *Revolusi Mental* (1971)⁶ and the *Malay Dilemma* (1970).⁷

Both works assume a homogenized world civilization and a single world history, and a single definition of the Malay. Both disregarded alternative forms of periodization and conform to the categories of development and social Darwinism, hence reproducing the image of the lazy Malay, in assuming the absence of change and transformation in Malay society. The *Revolusi Mental* can be summed up as capturing the image of the Malay as lacking in the following traits: initiative, spirit of inquiry, rationality, originality of thought, imagination, realistic attitude, self confidence, seriousness, industry and discipline. The Malays were also seen as oblivious to wealth, a disregard for time and punctuality. And as if directly emerging from the writings of the likes of Swettenham, Maxwell, Wilkinson, and Winstedt in one of the most notable repository of colonial knowledge, *Journal of the Malayan Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*,⁸ the Malays, says *Revolusi Mental*, is fatalistic.

At the same level Mahathir Mohamad's *The Malay Dilemma*, although arguably as been classified as a postcolonial discourse,

places the Malay and Malay society within the social Darwinist context of development. I am tempted to see that the most important book which has hegemonized much of Malay discourse with all its contradictions which emerged within Malay society over the last three decades, as an extension of the European knowledge system on post- 1969 Malay (Islamic) economic and political life. It justifies change and reform in instrumentalizing and rationalizing science, culture and religion. But one of the most significant constructs of the Malay as portrayed in *The Malay Dilemma* was the genetic and the environmental factor. Of the latter, the author argues that the Malay value system and ethics are impediments to progress. Indeed, the author argues that next to Islam, the most single most important change in the Malay environment was the massive influx of Chinese immigrants (p.23).

He implies that there was no change and transformation, perhaps much like the colonialists who used the social condition at that time to justify colonizing and civilizing the Malays. But what was most notable in his discourse is the concept of environment. The doctrine of determinism is prevalent in the *Malay Dilemma*. The McLuhanian ethos in Mahathir dominates the thinking in *The Malay Dilemma*:

Man's environment must therefore play a great part in shaping him, his family and his race. Next to heredity, environment is the most important fact responsible for the physical, mental, and psychological development of man (p.19).

That argument resonates colonial knowledge of Malay identity, in which as the key argument throughout the rest of the book, we see the negative side of the Malay – in the domain of wealth and property, and in the feudal and belief system. The negative (bad?, ugly?) traits of the Malays, resulting from the environment, which in turn reproduces and perpetuates the previous environment. Being Malay itself is conceivably the dilemma. But was there actually a Malay dilemma?

This is where the fourth option comes in, in that at the conceptual level, we call for an alternative discourse in the transformation of that space which has been invaded. The 'Malay dilemma' was configured from the crucible of the invaded native epistemological space as mentioned earlier in this paper. This implies that when an alien culture and its philosophy interferes with our thought system, that system is increasingly disempowered, and as such, limited, and sets a premise on our ability to define the world and ourselves. Subsequently the local order of things was replaced by a foreign one. Economically and culturally speaking, the history

of what is now Malaysia has been dominated, shaped and 'factualized' by colonial knowledge, and vice versa: the history of colonial knowledge has dominated the economic and cultural history of Malaysia, Shamsul clarifies the title of his 2001 essay.⁹ The *Malay Dilemma* does not see the constructed nature of Malay identity. The Colonial period and through this century, we have inherited the limits of our ability to define our world. *The Malay Dilemma* does not see that inability to 'define the world' and of ourselves as problematic. It was a problem of a false sense of identity and of defining our world. In the context of communication as an intellectual inquiry, this gave rise to the idea of 'one' communication – that of instrumental and political, expressed and reflected within the matrix of the modern nation-state. What has resulted then may be typologized under the category of irrelevance (Alatas, 1996), namely:

Lack of Originality Uncritical in problem setting, analysis, generalization, conceptualization, etc.

Inapplicability The problem of non-accordance between assumptions and reality

Alienation Discrepancy between the concerns of social science and the needs of the community

Redundance Propensity for scholars in non-western societies to uncritically assimilate verbal inventions and tautological expressions which do not represent new ideas

Mystification The use of jargon and pretentious language

Mediocrity Mediocre or shallow social science that attains high currency and prestige in the social science peripheries of the world

Each of the types of irrelevance can be seen at various levels. These are the levels of meta-analysis, theory, empirical studies and applied social science. The level of meta-analysis concerns the reflexive study of a discipline, body of work or theory. The concern is less with theoretical or substantive content and more with philosophical underpinnings, social and historical contexts, or cultural assumptions. The misreading of the cultural context of writing and journalism in Malaysia is an example of irrelevance (non-accordance) at the meta-analysis level. Another example is the misreading of Malay identity and social formation in the *Malay Dilemma*.

At the level of theory, we observe the assumption that there is a functional analogue to theories of development and progress in Malaya/Malaysia, and Islam and development, and the resulting theorization, is an example of irrelevance. Under empirical studies, we can provide some examples of research framework. Studies using modernization or Marxist theories, with their Orientalist

assumptions, are examples of irrelevance (inapplicability) at the level of empirical studies. In communication, this can be seen in public opinion and diffusion research. Finally, at the applied social science level, an example is the inability to understand the behaviour of the Malay community due to the irrelevance (non-accordance) of our assumptions of mind or *minda*, hence rationality and reason.

In this regard, space must be regarded as problematic in the thinking of non-Western and Malaysian communication scholars. Apart from being critical on the state of knowledge in communication, the scholar needs to develop a broad and deep sense of intellectual history, philosophy, and the contributions of the arts and sciences, in particular literature and biology, to the study of communication. Why this needs to be so is because our notion of theory and theorizing, our nonchalant position in the subject-object dichotomy, and our ambivalence at countering Eurocentricism have silenced our voices. Having direct and critical relevance impinging on exploring alternative epistemologies on communication is the historical and philosophical basis of research itself. We have never challenged the rules of the research game. Many in the communication fraternity do not normally question the formal rules of scholarly disciplines and paradigms, and how they are regulated, realized, written and theorized. As I have written in 'Rewriting History' (2004), imperialism, history, writing and they are indeed problematic concepts. While most would accept these as neutral and non-ideological, these are in effect words of emotion drawing attention to the thousands of ways in which language, knowledge and cultures have been silenced or misrepresented, ridiculed or condemned in academic and popular discourses. The concepts of imperialism and colonialism are used across a range of disciplines (communication studies included) and at various levels, often with meanings which are taken for granted, certainly be a vast majority of scholars in Asia and especially so in Malaysia and Southeast Asia. These are not normally seen to be problematic among the Malaysian intellectual community. Although critiques of (Western) history have been made by a notable few, the argument that history is a modernist project, integral to imperialist beliefs about the Other, has not inundated the shores of the intellectual community. The communication fraternity's ability to evade history as a totalizing discourse would enable it to develop cognitive, cultural and emotional and spiritual connections.

One lost narrative in our study of communication is the spiritualist tradition. I am not harping on the Islamization process, but looking at the spiritual as a legitimate realm in our discourse which has mostly been misrepresented. I think the most acceptable way to raise this realm is through Marshall McLuhan. As we may be aware of, the man has been described as many things – among

them the precursor of media studies, and a media prophet, and a jester. But we also see in him the image of a modern man whose existence is inconceivable without media, without medium, with or without message. To McLuhan, Man is a prosthetic animal, i.e. man needs to extend himself – literally and virtually. And this we see throughout human history and civilization in the various use of technology, creation of media, means of communication making possible empires, the perpetuation of myths, the source of power, and the instinct for control. McLuhan is seen to be all but rational. Any McLuhanite would be deemed irrational, perhaps a-rational. But what is it about Marshall McLuhan. In recent years, McLuhan's 'mediascape' is experiencing a kind of renaissance, rather a resurgence, much like, and in many ways, 'religious', akin to the Muslim (Islamic thought) resurgence over the last three decades beginning in the 1970s much triggered by the Iranian Revolution of 1978/9. In McLuhan too, there was a resurgence – a personal variant of the Tory, neo-Catholic, anti-modern tradition flourishing on both sides of the Atlantic then (Czitrom, 1982:166-167). He underwent a conversion to Catholicism. Indeed extending to his later studies on technology and the media, McLuhan's discourse was culturally expensive, universalist, and spatially oriented. The Catholic legacy in McLuhan appeared. Indeed, his teaching at Catholic universities for the rest of his career bears significance on his position in the history of technology which is in many ways a secularized version of the basic Christian story of Eden, the Fall, and Redemption. In McLuhan, we see the intimacy of technology to Godhead sundered in the moment of rational and sinful alienation. McLuhan draws from the Catholic vocabulary of ritual and sacrament. McLuhan's understanding of the oral tradition is deeply informed by a liturgical sense of chant and memory (such as 'medium is the message') rather than a political sense of discussion and debate. We do not see political-economy in McLuhan. The preliterate world for which he yearned was a liturgical world rather than a political one (Carey, 1998).

McLuhan's Catholicism provides him with an epistemological strategy that both gives him a privileged vantage-point on the processed world of technology and drives him beyond literary studies to an historical exploration of technological media as the 'dynamic' of modern culture. And the identity of modern culture is media. McLuhan reasons that all technologies are media because they go between ourselves and our environment. The media become our environment, and in using them, we are at the same time used by them. The 'mystic' in McLuhan places the media and technology as part of a broader religious drama with Aquinas, Joyce and Eliot acting in concert for individual and social redemption. Meaning is lost as a message moves toward the state of pure medium, or pure

being (McLuhan, 1954: 75). When the word, both spoken and written, becomes the medium; the medium is in turn transformed into another medium and goes back to the source.

If McLuhan is a poetic prophet of the media world, John Durham Peters is more of a poetic philosopher. His work *Speaking into the Air: A History of the Idea of Communication* (1999) goes back to history and provides much on the history of theory as central to the study of communication. If McLuhan sees religion, myth, history, art, literature and philosophy as the medium of medium, Peters sees all of these as establishing the historicity of communication, in while not explicitly acknowledging McLuhan, does much in justifying the impact of philosophy, Christian theology and the humanistic liberal tradition on communication and media studies. Yet, it presents a world where communication must always remain vague and frustrating (see especially Peters Introduction).

The representation of the idea of communication by Peters may not surprise many. He opts to provide a Platonic-Christian history of the idea of communication. Peter's history of an idea of communication begins with the classic debate between Plato and Jesus, which is reinterpreted as a debate between dialectic (communication as person-to-person dialogue) and dissemination (communication as one person 'speaking into the air,' from writing to TV or the Internet). This is not to emulate Peter's argument on the historicity of communication. True, we occasionally refer to prophecy and the prophetic tradition. But that tradition has not been seen as a source of relevant sociological and communication theories and concepts. We merely regard prophets as existing outside the realm of theory, and therefore arguably beyond human societal concepts, categories and classifications and imagination. We disregarded the *Imaginal Worlds*. We leave it to those in Islamic Studies – *syariah*, *usuluddin*, etc. Classic texts, the *hikayat*, and their preamble – *muqaddimah* inform us on theorizing communication, and so also the *isnad*, having relevance to the selection, transmission and dissemination of information and values. This we have recognized as legitimate within the territory of Malay and Islamic Studies. No major work or study on communication that I have come across has included the study of semantics in the context of godhead. For example, the relevance of Toshihiko Izutsu's 1964 work is critically absent.

While also not neglecting the Western origins of communication theories and concepts, we consider four significant sources, namely the 946-page *Handbook of Communication Science*, the four-volume *International Encyclopaedia of Communication* and the *Arts and Humanities Citation Index* for the period 1976-1983, and the *Encyclopaedic Dictionary of Semiotics*. Here we find communication threading through three areas – humanities, cognitive theory and semiotics. A significant

number of critical and analytical works contributing to the theories of information, knowledge structures, and meaning are found from the following: linguistics (Jakobson, Benveniste, Chomsky); philosophy of language (Wittgenstein, Quine, Austin, Kripke, Searle), hermeneutics (Heidegger, Gadamer, Habermas), phenomenology (Merleau-Ponty, Berger and Luckmann), French Structuralism (Sartre, Elvi-Strauss, Foucault, Lacan), semiotics (Saussure, Barthes, Eco, Culler), philosophy, history, and sociology of scientific knowledge (Popper, Kuhn, Lakatos), philosophy (Wittgenstein, Heidegger, Quine, Austin, Kripke, Searle, Whitehead, Fodor), anthropology (Levi-Strauss), neuroscience (Lashley, Marr), computer science (Wiener, von Neumann), artificial intelligence (Simon, Newell, Minsky), cognitive psychology (Piaget, Bruner, Miller). Similarly, a text on the history of social thought and theory would cover theorists such as Montesquieu, Vico, Comte, Spencer, Marx, Weber, Durkheim, Simmel, Tonnies, Sombart, Mannheim, Pareto, Sumner, Ward, Small and others.

Much like those who teach and study these theories in the Occident, we generally exclude non-Western thinkers. Even when they are, they tend to be cited out of historical interest rather than as sources of ideas. Our bias, in favor of American, or European theoretical perspectives in communication (or other social science disciplines and themes) only obstructs and obfuscates its thematisation in our teaching and thought, leading to a misrepresentation of our identity. It is almost always the subject-object dichotomy, Europeans and Americans in the foreground, Europeans and American as originators, and the dominance of European and American categories and concepts.

To many of us, it was the Americans or the Europeans who do the thinking and writing, they are the social theorists and the thinkers, philosophers and scholars, and sometimes prophets too, of media and communication (if we literally believe in what has been described of McLuhan). They are what we might call, the knowing subject. They define us in terms of objects of study – as citizens of nation-states, as a society, as consumers of technology and information, as *homo techne*, as *homo narrans*. They define to us on information, on media, and on communication, and almost always, bracketed within the matrix of modernity, or post-modernity, or globalization. We are not knowing subjects. We do not have a history. In our discussions on communication, media and say, journalism, we begin from the modern period, and look at the past only as a historical phenomena, denying the origins of our life and culture. It is at the expense of our ideas, thinkers and taught. What significance have we gathered from our 'pekerjaan kalam' in our study of literacy, writing and journalism as a continuous and seamless process? The scholarship and identity of Malay journalism,

for example, would always begin with the first Malay-language newspaper in Malaysia, i.e., *Jawi peranakkan*. But how much do we know of the continuity and the transformations recurring in history deriving from the writing tradition of the Malays giving form to journalism? Do we have to wait for Winstedt, or Braginsky to inform us on our heritage? Do we have to wait for another monumental study by either the British, Americans, Germans, or Dutch to recognize Abdullah Munsi, Syed Shaikh al-Hady or Za'ba as sources of ideas, theories and concepts in the study of our society in all its manifestations? There has never been much interest in studying their concepts with a view of developing a theoretical perspective for studies in communication. The case of Ibn Khaldun is a classic case in point. And so also, relevant to communication is the study of Ibn Arabi, and al-Farabi. These philosophers and scholars remain marginal to our corpus. One critical factor being our premises on the epistemology and ontology of thought and mind.

Conclusion

I have made suggestions and called for an alternative intellectual tradition (see Merican 2005A).

In our study of communication, we assume a rational mind – scientific, logical and bearing upon reason and capable of making choices. Minds are not universal. That universality has been given to us only because it has been constructed to be as such. Perhaps we have to redress this defect in our comprehension of mind. Here I am attracted to the concept, category and classification in exploring the mind within the larger domain of and in particular the mind of the Malay. In his study of the Malay mind, Lim Kim-Hui (2003) centers it on *budi*. Is that missing in communication, both at the epistemological and ontological levels of investigation by and of the Malay being? Studies on media, communication and (Malay/modern society) carried out by Malaysian scholars largely miss out on the many nuances of *budi* in the Malay worldview. When we deal with the mind of the Malay, and in the Malay interaction with the media environment, for example, it is the '*budi* and its networks' that determine thought (and judgment), moral attitudes, virtue and the presentation of arguments. Lim elucidates that the Malay mind develops through a spectrum of *akal budi* and *budi-hati*, which encompass 'mind-emotion-moral-goodness-practicality' in the scale of decision-making. He calls for a responsible understanding of rationality, *budi*, and emotion and their employment in our everyday life. And employing *budi* to communication behaviour in Malay society could perhaps illuminate us on the other side of rationality, that is the a-rational being which may well constitute a category, erstwhile absent, in communication scholarship.

Bearing in mind the problematic nature of communication and identity both at the epistemological and ontological levels, we need to uncreate in our consciousness, and contest our 'epistemological space.' Our present approaches in the investigation and teaching of the Social and Human Sciences, in particular Sociology, Anthropology, Psychology, Literature, History, Technology and Science, and of Communication and Media Studies quarantine our worldview and provide a sense of disconnectedness (rather perhaps a ghostly neglected presence of our psyche and *budi*) to our society. These sources of knowledge originate from the other side of the metropolitan divide; but this is not the question of where the knowledge came from. It is more so of its relevance, in responding to its perceived and constructed universality. And we should also not assume that there are equivalent alternative discourses. Again, on questions of communication and identity, we must be cognizant of our existence in 'overlapping territories' and 'intertwined histories;' more so in the modern globalized world characterized by the impulse of recolonization.

But then again, should we overcome our 'defeatist consciousness' in exposing thinkers and thoughts of philosophers and scholars in the likes of Rumi, Ibn Khaldun, Albiruni, Rabindranath Tagore, Jose Rizal, Benoy Kumar Sarkar, and Yanagita Kunio, and meaningfully (re)introduce some of the classic transcending the East/West dichotomy? At least, if we are not able to reproduce the like of Anthropology, or Sociology or Communication (not yet? may never?) we can begin our resolve in weaving History through Literature in redefining the subjects for an insight on theory and gaining some fundamental assumptions on society. There has to be more theoretical work undertaken. For example, there are many works that describe Ibn Khaldun's, which has relevance to Sociology and Communication; but there has been negligible amount of theory building that would result in what we may call neo-Khaldunian social theory, that is, work that goes beyond the mere comparison of some ideas and concepts in Ibn Khaldun with those of Western theorists, toward the theoretical integration of his theory into a framework that employs some of the tools of modern social science (Gellner 1981; Alatas, 1993). The message here is to 'mainstream' hitherto marginalized sources of knowledge.

Here is where notion such as mind, and intellect, which under present conditions, have an uneasy connection with our cosmological being, would for example, have to be reconfigured to more deep-rooted notions and meanings of *budi*, *jiwa*, *rasa*, *rupa*, *akal* and *makna* informing us on the realm of consciousness intimate to our thought structures. And then there is the social science concept of religion, having its peculiar cultural origins which in turn enters into an Eurocentric scientific discourse and very much subconsciously

dominant in modern life. This has led us to study how, for example, the West (and our Other) cover the religion of Islam and that of we as Muslims. We rarely, if ever, investigate how we cover our religion – how Muslims, or the media in Muslim societies cover Islam and other religions, precisely because we have taken it for granted, and are not able to arrive at that consciousness manifesting religion as a public domain, as the basis of our actions, perpetuated, among other institutions, by the mass media. I realized this when I was writing a paper on religious ideas in Malay newspapers (see Merican, 2005B). The obfuscation of Malay identity can also be seen in our notions of *bangsa*, *perjuangan*, *semangat*, *raja* and *kerajaan*. These do not render meaningful translations in other languages. These words do not have their equivalents in the dominant Social Science discourses. Terms like *feudal* and *budaya popular* have been uncritically accepted in error when applied in describing and explaining social conditions and arrangements in the non-western world subsequent to contacts with the European West. Popular culture (*Budaya popular*) has been epistemologically and ontologically embedded in discourses at the policy, academic and popular levels without appreciating the differences in structural existence and social formation between the Occident and the non-Occidental world Malay society. (See Merican and Abd. Rasid, 1999). These are the questions and issues that must be raised in the academe and among the intellectual community – individually and collectively. We cannot appreciate and comprehend culture if our identity is not visible to ourselves.

Notes

- 1 The book is being edited by Ahmad Murad Merican and Ahmad Farami Abdul Karim. The first part of the title 'Blinded by the Lights' is taken, with permission, from Zaharom Nain's paper presented at the Colloquium titled 'Blinded by the Lights: The Study of Communication, Intellectual Integrity and Malaysian Academia.'
- 2 Yusef Progler, ' "White Studies' and the University in Ruins,' paper presented to the International Workshop: Redesign of Social Science Curricula,' Penang, 19-22 November, 2004.
- 3 *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, volume 32, no.3, 355-366.
- 4 Shaharuddin's paper is a rejoinder to Timothy P. Barnard's *Contesting Malayness: Malay Identity Across Boundaries*: Singapore, 2004.
- 5 See Ahmad Murad Merican, 'Rewriting History,' *New Sunday Times* (Learning Curve), September 12, 2004,
- 6 See Senu Abdul Rahman (1971). *Revolusi Mental*. Kuala Lumpur: Penerbitan Utusan Melayu.
- 7 See Mahathir Mohamad (1970). *The Malay Dilemma*. Singapore: Times Books.
- 8 The Journal was first published as the *Straits Branch* in 1878.
- 9 'A History of an Identity, an Identity of a History: The Idea and Practice of "Malayness" in Malaysia Reconsidered'

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